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Why We Misjudged Vietnam

By RICHARD J. LEVINE

WASHINGTON--Rarely has a Defense Secretary been so provably and consistently wrong as James Schlesinger was in his public statements about the Vietnam war last month.

On March 13, three days after the North Vietnamese drive began in the highlands, Secretary Schlesinger stated that Hanoi was only trying to "chip away at the rural areas" and that its main attack wouldn't come until next year.

A week later, Mr. Schlesinger acknowledged that a "major offensive" was under way, but he said South Vietnam intended to hold coastal cities and that the enemy probably wouldn't go after Saigon until next year.

On March 31, with major coastal cities lost, Mr. Schlesinger predicted an attack on Saigon "in the next month or two."

Today Mr. Schlesinger realizes, along with every newspaper reader, that Saigon could fall at any moment. But his public statements in March—which were accurately reflecting the intelligence reports he was reading each day—symbolize an important but generally overlooked development: As South Vietnam began to crumble, the U.S. intelligence system for that part of the world fell apart.

Thus, Washington wasn't warned that North Vietnam would launch an all-out offensive this year and that the South Vietnamese army (ARVN) would collapse and desert the northern two-thirds of the country. Instead, the intelligence community reported that a major military campaign wouldn't come until 1976, and that ARVN remained a significant fighting force.

"I think it is safe to say," Secretary of State Henry Kissinger noted the other day, "that there was no expectation of a massive North Vietnamese attack this year."

What went wrong, and why? The intelligence breakdown is easier to describe than to explain, but some preliminary judgments are possible.

For one thing, the intelligence community—consisting of the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency and the State Department's Intelligence Bureau—mistakenly expected the North Vietnamese to follow their past pattern of launching offensives in years when the U.S. holds presidential elections. And it badly overestimated the morale of South Vietnamese army units, which had been sapped by worsening economic conditions and declining U.S. military aid.

In part, these miscalculations stemmed from having an inadequate number of intelligence officials in the field, from deliberate distortion of reports by the U.S. Embassy over the years and from a general unwillingness to pass on bad news once the rout had started.

A Fundamental Problem

But the mistakes also reflected a fundamental inability of American officials, whose current assessments were clouded by past perceptions, to conceive of a complete collapse in South Vietnam. Having committed years of their lives to making U.S. policy work, they simply couldn't accept the idea that the situation was as bleak as it was.

"A human being has to justify what he has done," says an Army general with long experience in Vietnam. "People who have spent years over there can't be objective on this."

And then there was an element of bad luck. Graham Martin, the U.S. Ambassador in Saigon and a close confident of President Nguyen van Thieu, was back in the U.S. for lobbying—and some dental work—when President Thieu made his disastrous decision to abandon the Central Highlands. The U.S. didn't find out about the decision until after the order had been issued.

Looking back, Mr. Schlesinger insists now that the main "deficiencies" in U.S. intelligence involved "not the estimate of (Hanoi's) intentions but the estimate of the capabilities of South Vietnam." (A Schlesinger aide puts it more bluntly: "The mistake we made was in overestimating the determination and purposefulness of ARVN.") To its credit, Mr. Schlesinger says, the intelligence community did couple its prediction of an offensive in 1976 with a warning that North Vietnam could speed up its schedule if presented with new "opportunities"--which is exactly what ARVN's panicky retreat created.

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But intelligence analysts almost always qualify their assessments, sometimes to reflect reality, more often to protect their reputations. So the President and other top officials kept in mind the central message—no offensive this year—and ignored the qualifications.

Relying heavily on aerial photography, the intelligence community did produce an accurate picture of the North Vietnamese buildup of divisions, armor, artillery, bases and paved roads to permit quick movement of these forces. But it failed to comprehend [illegible]

military situation. And having seen the North Vietnamese launch major campaigns in the presidential-election years of 1968 and 1972, it made the mistake of thinking the past pattern would hold. D-day would come in 1976, not 1975.

"When you get to the tail-end of the analytical process," says a Pentagon man, "intelligence is as much art as science." This time, the artistry was poor.

The failure to see and report the underlying weakness of the South Vietnamese forces stems from a wide variety of factors.

A high official glumly concludes that the intelligence system, ostensibly designed to give Washington a candid account of conditions and events in Vietnam, once again tended to "filter out" information that reflected poorly on the Thieu regime. Consequently, the true extent of the army's demoralization never was fully recognized.

For example, inflation and recession had combined to reduce the standard of living of the South Vietnamese soldier by about 40% over the past two years. While this was reported, the small details that could have driven home the effect of economic conditions on ARVN morale (such as the basic fact that some soldiers didn't have enough to eat) never reached Washington.

Who was responsible? One answer is Graham Martin, the U.S. Ambassador who tightly controlled the flow of information from the Embassy in Saigon. But others were involved, including Foreign Service officers and members of the defense attache's office who served as Washington's eyes and ears in the field.

By late last month, says one Pentagon official who was reading the cable traffic from Saigon, "it was clear that no one wanted to be the purveyor of bad information, and I was discounting 50% of what I was reading."

Washington's Self-Deception

Some longtime critics of American policy in Indochina argue that the government was surprised by events in March because it had systematically been deceiving itself about progress for years--with false "body counts," for example, and with distorted reports on "Vietnamization."

The distortion problem isn't new. An August 1974 report by two respected staff members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee declared:

"Over the years the American Embassy in Saigon has acquired a reputation . . . for close identification with the policies of the South Vietnamese government and for selective reporting. These same tendencies are apparent today. Each week the four consulates general in South Vietnam send the Embassy a round-up of events relating to the military situation [illegible] implementation of the Paris (peace) agreement.

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"The Embassy submits a summary of this information, together with comments on developments in Saigon, in the form of a weekly telegraphic report to Washington. A review of the material used by the Embassy to prepare these reports indicates that the thrust of information submitted from the field to Saigon is sometimes altered and that on occasion significant information is withheld altogether."

But even toned-down reports based on first-hand information from the field can be better than reports based on little more than guesswork. And once the rout began, it mainly was guesswork that Washington was receiving. "Our means of getting information was about zero," says a military man. Without any American officials with ARVN in the field, Washington was unaware for several days of the complete disintegration of unit integrity and morale.

At first, U.S. officials believed that Danang could be defended because of the presence of two crack units—the South Vietnamese marines and the 1st Division. But they were unaware the 1st, often described as Saigon's best division, started to scatter as soon as the men realized that Hue, where their families were, was being abandoned.

"We had no military reports," says an Army officer. "We thought that they were up there doing their jobs. If we had known early on that the 1st Division had collapsed we would have said the odds were 9 to 1 against defending Danang."

In fairness to American intelligence, it should be pointed out that Hanoi's leaders apparently were also caught in an intelligence gap. An Agence France-Presse newsman reported from the North Vietnamese capital that "even the most skeptical officials in Hanoi now admit that the demoralization of the South Vietnamese army was much greater than they expected."

But that's little comfort for Washington officials watching in horror—and surprise—as the final chapter on America's involvement in South Vietnam is written.

Mr. Levine, a member of the Journal's Washington bureau, covers military affairs.

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